

World Premiere Brings Sounds of Mango Street to Princeton

By **Elaine Strauss** - May 15, 2019



Author Sandra Cisneros and composer Derek Bermel.

The Princeton Symphony (PSO) reaches its current season's climax with "Mango Suite," a world premiere collaboration by composer Derek Bermel and writer Sandra Cisneros, author of the novel "The House on Mango Street." The performance takes place at Princeton University's Richardson Auditorium on Sunday,

May 19, at 4 p.m.

Bermel — who will appear with Cisneros in a public conversation at Richardson on Saturday, May 18 — accounts for "Mango Suite" by remembering his conversation with PSO conductor Rossen Milanov, who sought a new piece for the PSO in 2017: Milanov wanted something slow and ballad-like, with the feel of a waltz.

As a composer, Bermel, whose musical forays have led to worldwide travel, was thinking about pieces like Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" with a narrative component. He also has had a long and cordial relationship with Milanov.

Bermel's search for a story led him to Cisneros and her novel, and the two collaborated enthusiastically on "Mango Suite." So successful was their collaboration that they plan to create an opera from the material.

Bermel, currently in residence with the Seattle Symphony, was available for a telephone interview before returning to New Jersey.

"All the words in 'Mango Suite' are Sandra's," he says. "The book is a novel, not an autobiography, and is much acclaimed. I ran into it in the early 1990s. Through a string of very short entries Sandra details the development from childhood of Esperanza, a fictional native of Chicago. They read like a young girl's diary entries; there are many settings and genres. Their specificity makes the writing universal. They inspired an entire generation of readers and artists."

Cisneros' book has sold more than 6 million copies, has been translated into more than 20 languages, and is required in schools throughout the United States.

Bermel is known in the Princeton area from his four-year tenure as artist-in-residence at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study (IAS). "As artist-in-residence at IAS I learned how similar creative experience is among scholars, artists, and scientists," he says. "All of them have a body of knowledge, encounter a spark, and then leap into the unknown. At the institute I saw how similar that

process was in different fields. I went to different tables at lunch and tried to mingle.”

At the institute Bermel intensified his exploration of the world’s musical traditions. Before his institute appointment his trajectory included West Africa, Brazil, Bulgaria, and Ireland. His languages include Portuguese, Dutch, French, and Italian.



The concert also includes three works by Spanish composer Manuel de Falla with special guest flamenco dancer Griseta Damas Roche.

Bermel’s collaboration with Cisneros and exposure to Latino identity delighted him. “Sandra’s novel felt very relevant to me,” Bermel says. “Her writing is particularly lyrical and lends itself to musical settings. Besides that, it shows the Latino identity culturally and musically.” Cisneros shares Bermel’s enthusiasm about their collaboration.

Looking to the future, Bermel says, “During our meetings, Sandra and I decided to make an opera from ‘Mango Street.’ So far we’ve come up with a synopsis. We still have to figure out the structure and work out how to handle the story as an opera.”

“Mango Suite” is the first Bermel/Cisneros collaboration. “It began with a very formal request from my publisher to her agent about setting her work to music,” Bermel says. As the collaboration unfolded, Bermel realized that Cisneros’ words inspired his music. “Being exposed to the orchestral entity of her work was like dipping a toe into the material.” The process of working together, he says, allowed the collaboration to expand.

“Collaboration is a way to keep the learning process going,” Bermel says. “Often my colleagues and my peers become my teachers. I learn and input information from many sources, without pre-judging their basis. I want to know more. Good input results in good output, regardless of its source. I try to avoid re-hashing something I’ve done before.”

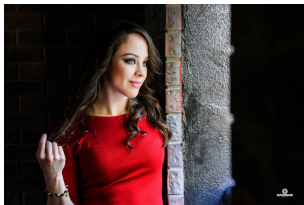
Composer Bermel’s stint as composer-in-residence for the Seattle Symphony ends in May, and he found opportunities for novel experiences on the west coast. In Seattle he worked for the first time with electronics and combining electronics with instruments. His introduction to electronics came in a collaboration with an individual photographer, engineer/producer. He says, with a certain amount of amazement, “I wrote a piece for the Seattle Symphony and recorded it. Then I took the recorded material, manipulated it, and played it back, along with instrumental and electronic samples.”

Seattle provided Bermel him with other new explorations. He worked with young composers writing for orchestra; their recent works are to be performed in May before he returns to New Jersey. In addition, reaching into new territory, he worked on a musical

project based on the experiences of veterans experiencing homelessness.

Bermel tries to pursue what he calls “a curatorial role” in the various residencies that he has held. “I like to build in chances for others to shine,” he says. I like to reveal my larger world to composers, musicians, writers, filmmakers and my audience. As I see it, it’s a privilege to share what inspires me with others.”

Among the areas that Bermel shares this year is a project that grew out of his involvement in a wide-ranging Korean art festival. The project involved Korean sculpture as well as aspects of the language and music of Korea. Bermel immersed himself in the activities of a 16th-century Korean king who was also a linguist and composer. He was intrigued by the non-western Korean alphabet and collaborated with an installation artist whose specialties included visual art and sculpture. Specifying no particular outcome, he says, “I dipped into learning about writing the language.” Tune in again in a few seasons to find out what emerges from the Korean foray.



Mezzo-soprano Paulina Villarreal joins the Princeton Symphony for the world premiere of 'Mango Suite.'

“I love languages,” Bermel admits. “I always cared about the sound and structure of languages and accents and dialects. Since languages are expressed through sound, they are inherently tonal and audible. Music has a direct relation to language. There is a link between language, abstract music, and song.”

“For me song is a theatrical, exaggerated way of telling stories. People listening to song allow it to go beyond narrative. They allow song to speak to them in way different from mere narration.”

“I think of song as a type of performance where the listener suspends disbelief. A concert tells stories through song and demands that listeners abandon their doubts. The communication between performer and audience is in an unexpected format. If I’m on stage talking to an audience, it’s different from person-to-person communication.”

Bermel perceives a special role for using the human voice in music. “When a composition includes voice,” he says, “the audience listens for different things than when they hear only instrumental sounds. Using voice is both an opportunity and challenge.”

A clarinetist, Bermel admits that he loves performing. He performs equally cheerfully as a soloist or in an ensemble.

The peculiarities of particular performing venues leave Bermel unfazed. His blood pressure remains stable when he confronts dramatic changes such as the difference between performing spaces. For example, he says Chautauqua, New York, has

presented alternative versions of "Mango Suite" in spaces accommodating audiences of 4,000 and incorporated elaborate dance elements. In Princeton Richardson Auditorium seats only about 1,000 people and has stage dimensions that limit more extravagant performance. "Every performance is an opportunity to see the work in a different way," says Bermel.

Author Discussion, Princeton Symphony Orchestra, Richardson Auditorium, Princeton University. Saturday, May 18, 3 p.m. Author Sandra Cisneros speaks with composer Derek Bermel. Guest vocalist Paulina Villareal and pianist Steven Beck play excerpts from Bermel's "Mango Suite." Free; tickets required.

"Mango Suite" World Premiere, Princeton Symphony Orchestra, Richardson Auditorium, Princeton University. Sunday, May 19, 4 p.m. \$28 and up. 609-497-0020 or www.princetonorchestra.org

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